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President Gerald R. Ford to members of Congress, 12 August 1974

Gerald R. Ford

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TO THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES:

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, distinguished guests and dear friends:

My fellow Americans, we have a lot of work to do.

My former colleagues, you and I have a lot of work to do.

Let's get on with it.

I am grateful for your very warm welcome.

I am not here to make an inaugural address. The nation needs action, not words.

Nor will this be a formal report on the State of the Union. God willing, I will have at least three more chances to do that.

It's good to be back in the People's House.

But this cannot be a real homecoming. Under the Constitution, I now belong to the Executive Branch. The Supreme Court has even ruled that I am the Executive Branch, head, heart, and hand.

With due respect to the learned Justices -- and I greatly respect the Judiciary -- part of my heart will always be here on Capitol Hill. I know well the co-equal role of the Congress in our Constitutional process. I love the House of Representatives. I revere the traditions of the Senate despite my too-short internship there. As President, within the limits of basic principles, my motto towards the Congress is communication, conciliation, compromise and cooperation.

This Congress will, I am confident, be my working partner as well as my most constructive critic. I am not asking for conformity. I am dedicated to the two party system, and you know which party is mine.

I do not want a honeymoon with you. I want a good marriage.

I want progress and problem solving which requires my best efforts, and also your best efforts.

I have no need to learn how Congress speaks for the people.

As President, I intend to listen.

But I also intend to listen to the people themselves -- all the people -- as I promised them last Friday. I want to be sure we are all tuned in to the real voice of America.

My Administration starts off by seeking unity in diversity. My office door has always been open and that is how it is going to be at the White House. Yes, Congressmen will be welcomed -- if you don't overdo it.

The first seven words of the Constitution and the most important are these: We the People of the United States. We, the people, ordained and established the Constitution and reserved to themselves all powers not granted to Federal and State governments. I respect and will always be conscious of that fundamental rule of freedom.

Only eight months ago, when I last stood here, I told you I was a Ford, not a Lincoln. Tonight I say I am still a Ford, but I am not a Model T.

I do have some old-fashioned ideas. I believe in the basic decency and fairness of America. I believe in the integrity and patriotism of the Congress. And while I am aware of the House rule that one never speaks to the galleries, I believe in the First Amendment and the absolute necessity of a free press.

But I also believe that over two centuries since the First Continental Congress was convened, the direction of our nation's movement has been forward. I am here to confess

that in my first campaign for President -- of my senior class in South High School in Grand Rapids, I headed the Progressive Party ticket.

Now I ask you to join with me in getting this country revved up and moving.

My instinctive judgment is that the State of the Union is excellent. But the state of our economy is not so good.

Everywhere I have been as Vice President, some 118,000 miles into 40 States and through 55 news conferences, the unanimous concern of Americans is inflation. For once all the polls agree. They also suggest that people blame government far more than either management or labor for the high cost of everything.

You who come from 50 States, three territories and the District of Columbia know this better than I. That is why you have created since I left here your new Budget Reform Committee. I welcome it and will work with its members to bring the Federal budget into balance by fiscal 1976.

The fact is that for the past 25 years that I served here, the Federal budget has been balanced in only six.

Mr. Speaker, I am a little late getting around to it but confession is good for the soul. I have sometimes voted to spend more taxpayer's money for worthy Federal projects in Grand Rapids while vigorously opposing wasteful Federal boondoggles in Oklahoma.

Be that as it may, Mr. Speaker, you and I have always stood together against unwarranted cuts in national defense. This is no time to change that nonpartisan policy.

Just as escalating Federal spending has been a prime cause of higher prices over many years, it may take some time to stop inflation.

But we must begin now.

For a start, before your Labor Day recess, Congress should reactivate the Cost of Living Council through passage

of a clean bill, without reimposing controls, that will let us monitor wages and prices to expose abuses.

The American wage earner and the American housewife are a lot better economists than most economists care to admit.

They know that a government big enough to give you everything you want, is a government big enough to take from you everything you have.

If we want to restore confidence in ourselves as working politicians, the first thing we all have to do is learn how to say "No."

The first specific request by the Ford Administration is not to Congress but to the voters in the upcoming November elections. It is this: Support your candidates, Congressmen and Senators, Democrats or Republicans, conservative or liberal, who consistently vote for tough decisions to cut the cost of government, restrain Federal spending and bring inflation under control.

I applaud the initiatives the Congress has already taken. The only fault I find with the Joint Economic Committee inflation study authorized last week is that we need its expert findings in six weeks instead of six months.

A month ago the distinguished majority leader of the Senate asked the White House to convene an economic conference of members of Congress, the President's economic consultants and some of the best economic brains from labor, industry and agriculture.

Later this was perfected by resolution to assemble a domestic summit meeting to devise a bipartisan action plan for stability and growth in the American economy. Neither I nor my staff have much time just now for letter writing. So I will respond in person. I accept your suggestion and I will personally preside.

Furthermore, I propose that this summit meeting be held at an early date and in full view of the American public. They are as anxious to get the right answers as we are.

My first priority is to work with you to bring inflation under control. Inflation is our domestic public enemy No. 1. To restore economic confidence, the government in Washington must provide leadership. It does no good to blame the public for spending too much when the government is spending too much.

I began to put my Administration's own economic house in order, starting last Friday.

I instructed my Cabinet officers and counselors and my White House staff to make fiscal restraint their first order of business, and to save every taxpayer's dollar the safety and genuine welfare of the country will permit. Some economic activities will be effected more by monetary and fiscal restraints than other activities. Good government clearly requires that we tend to the economic problems facing our country in a spirit of equity to all of our citizens.

Tonight is no time to threaten you with vetoes. But I do have that last recourse and am a veteran of many a veto fight in this very chamber. Can't we do the job better by reasonable compromise?

Minutes after I took the Presidential oath, the joint leadership of Congress told me at the White House they would go more than half way to meet me. This was confirmed in your unanimous concurrent resolution of cooperation, for which I am deeply grateful. If for my part I go more than half way to meet the Congress, maybe we will find a much larger area of national agreement.

I bring no legislative shopping list tonight. I will deal with specifics in future messages and talks with you. But here are a few examples of my seriousness.

Last week the Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education bill and I found it on my desk. Any reservations I might have about some of its provisions -- and I do have -- fade in comparison to the urgent needs of America for quality education. I will sign it in a few days. I must be frank. In implementing its provisions, I will oppose excessive funding during this inflationary crisis.

As Vice President, I studied various proposals for better health care financing. I saw them coming closer together, and urged my friends in the Congress and in the Administration to sit down and sweat out a sound compromise. The Comprehensive Health Insurance Plan goes a long way towards providing early relief to people who are sick.

Why don't we write a good health bill on the statute books before this Congress adjourns?

The economy of our country is critically dependent on how we interact with the economies of other countries. It is little comfort that our inflation is only part of a world-wide problem, or that American families need less of their paychecks for groceries than most of our foreign friends.

As one of the building blocks of peace, we have taken the lead in working toward a more open and equitable world economic system. A new round of international trade negotiations started last September among 105 nations in Tokyo. The others are waiting for the United States Congress to grant the necessary authority to proceed.

With modifications, the Trade Reform bill passed by the House last year would do that. I understand good progress has been made in the Senate Committee. But I am optimistic, as always, that the Senate will pass an acceptable bill quickly as a key part of our joint prosperity campaign.

I am determined to expedite other international economic plans. We will be working together with other nations to find better ways to prevent shortages of food and fuel. We must not let last winter's energy crisis happen again. I will push Project Independence for our own good and the good of others. In that too, I will need your help.

Successful foreign policy is an extension of the hopes of the whole American people for a world of peace and orderly freedom. So I would say a few words to our distinguished guests from the governments of other nations where, as at home, it is my determination to deal openly with allies and adversaries.

Over the past five and a half years, in Congress and as Vice President, I have fully supported the outstanding foreign policy of President Nixon. This I intend to continue.

Throughout my public service, starting with wartime naval duty under the command of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, I have upheld all our Presidents when they spoke for my country to the world. I believe the Constitution commands this. I know that in this crucial area of international policy I can count on your firm support.

Let there be no doubt or misunderstanding anywhere. There are no opportunities to exploit, should anyone so desire. There will be no change of course, no relaxation of vigilance, no abandonment of the helm of our Ship of State as the watch changes. We stand by our commitments and will live up to our responsibilities, in our formal alliances, in our friendships and in our improving relations with any potential adversaries.

On this, Americans are united and strong. Under my term of leadership I hope we will become more united. I am certain we will remain strong.

A strong defense is the surest way to peace. Strength makes detente attainable. Weakness invites war, as my generation knows from four bitter experiences.

Just as America's will for peace is second to none, so will America's strength be second to none.

We cannot rely on the forbearance of others to protect this nation. The power and diversity of the Armed Forces, the resolve of our fellow-citizens, the flexibility in our command to navigate international waters that remain troubled -- all are essential to our security.

I shall continue to insist on civilian control of our superb military establishment. The Constitution plainly requires the President to be the Commander-in-Chief, and I will be.

Our job will not be easy. In promising continuity, I cannot promise simplicity. The problems and challenges of the world remain complex and difficult. But we have set out upon a path of reason and fairness, and we will continue on it.

As guideposts on that path, I can offer the following:

-- To our allies of a generation, in the Atlantic community and Japan, I pledge continuity in the loyal collaboration on our many mutual endeavors.

-- To our friends and allies in this hemisphere, I pledge continuity in the deepening dialogue to define renewed relationships of equality and justice.

-- To our allies and friends in Asia, I pledge a continuity in our support for their security, independence, and economic development. In Indochina, we are determined to see the observance of the Paris Agreement on Vietnam and the cease-fire and negotiated settlement in Laos. We hope to see an early compromise settlement in Cambodia.

-- To the Soviet Union, I pledge continuity in our commitment to the course of the past three years. To our two peoples, and to all mankind, we owe a continued effort to live, and where possible, to work together in peace; for,

in a thermo-nuclear age, there can be no alternative to a positive and peaceful relationship between our nations.

-- To the People's Republic of China, whose legendary hospitality I enjoyed, I pledge continuity in our commitment to the principles of the Shanghai Communique. The new relationship built on those principles has demonstrated that it serves serious and objective mutual interests and has become an enduring feature on the world scene.

-- To the nations of the Middle East, I pledge continuity in our vigorous efforts to advance the process which has brought hopes of peace to that region after 25 long years as a hotbed of war. We shall carry out our promise to promote continuing negotiation among all parties for a complete, just and lasting settlement.

-- To all nations, I pledge continuity in seeking a common global goal: a stable international structure of trade and finance which reflects the interdependence of all peoples.

-- To the entire international community -- to the United Nations, to the world's non-aligned nations, and to all others -- I pledge a continuity in our dedication to the humane goals which throughout our history have been so much a part of our contribution to mankind.

So long as the peoples of the world have confidence in our purposes and faith in our word, the age-old vision of peace on earth will continue to grow brighter.

I pledge myself unreservedly to that goal. I say to you in words that cannot be improved upon: Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.

As Vice President, I addressed myself to the individual rights of Americans in the area of privacy. There will be no illegal tapings, eavesdropping, buggings, or break-ins by my Administration. There will be hot pursuit of tough laws to prevent illegal invasions of privacy in both government and private activities.

On the higher plane of public morality, there is no need for me to preach tonight. We have thousands of far better preachers and millions of sacred Scriptures to guide us on the path of personal right-living and exemplary official conduct. If we can make effective and earlier use of the moral and ethical wisdom of the centuries in today's complex society, we will prevent more crime and corruption than all the policemen and prosecutors governments can ever deter. This is a job that must begin at home, not in Washington.

I once told you that I am not a saint, and hope never to see the day that I cannot admit having made a mistake. So I will close with another confession.

Frequently along the tortuous road of recent months, from this chamber to the President's House, I protested that I was my own man.

Now I realize that I was wrong.

I am your man, for it was your carefully weighed confirmation that changed my occupation.

I am the people's man, for you acted in their name, and I accepted and began my new and solemn trust with a promise to serve all the people, and to do the best I can for America.

When I say all the people I mean exactly that.

To the limits of my strength and ability, I will be the President of the black, brown, red and white Americans, of old and young, of women's liberationists and male chauvinists and all the rest of us in between, of the poor and the rich, of native sons and new refugees, of those who work at lathes or at desks or in mines or in the fields, and of Christians, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists and Atheists, if there really are any Atheists after what we have all been through.

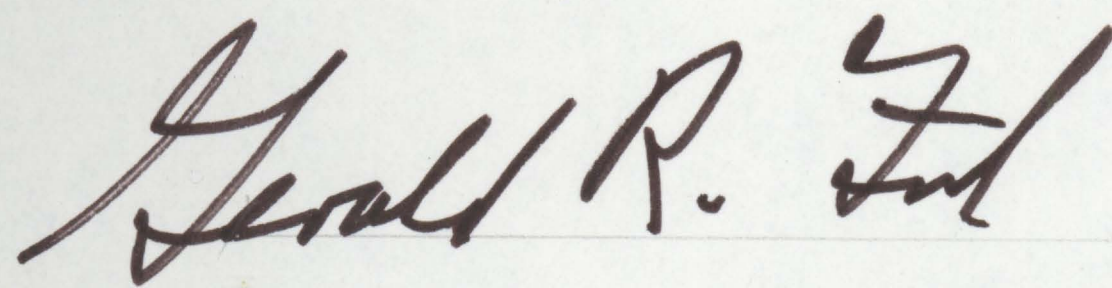
Fellow-Americans, a final word:

I want to be a good President.

I need your help.

We all need God's sure guidance.

With it, nothing can stop the United States of America.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Gerald R. Ford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Gerald" is written with a large, sweeping 'G'. The middle initial "R." is written in a smaller, more compact cursive. The last name "Ford" is written with a large, sweeping 'F' and a trailing flourish.

THE WHITE HOUSE,

August 12, 1974.

MESSAGE

FROM

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

*The President of the Senate
of the United States*